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## Oxford Handbooks Online

### **The Role of Darkness in Ancient Greek Religion and Religious Practice**

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The Oxford Handbook of Light in Archaeology

*Edited by Costas Papadopoulos and Holley Moyes*

Subject: Archaeology, Ritual and Religion, Art and Architecture, Archaeology of Europe

Online Publication Date: Aug 2017 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198788218.013.2

### **Abstract and Keywords**

Aiming at a better understanding of ways through which the ancient Greek religious experience was shaped, this chapter investigates the role and use of darkness in religious belief and practice. The orientation and certain architectural features of Greek temples, Dionysiac and Mystery cults, divination, rites of passage, magic, and other nocturnal rituals are examined here in an investigation of the interplay between light, darkness, and shadow and the aims fulfilled by such associations. It transpires that darkness was a decisive element in the religious experience, one that intensified the emotional condition of the participants, whilst shaping the ritual experience and memory of the event.

Keywords: Eleusinian Mysteries, Dionysiac Mysteries, oracle of the dead-Nekyomanteion, pannychis, magic, Arrephoria, nocturnal rites, temple orientation, astronomy, religious experience

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## Introduction

The performance of ancient Greek festivals and religious rituals was carefully staged, established through tradition, bound in myth, and legitimated by the god honoured. Temporality in ancient Greek rituals was as significant as all their other elements. The time of day or night and season a ritual was held determined its character, thus making its timing inseparable from its purpose. Clear parallels of this are found in festivals connected with agricultural activities. Such were the Thesmophoria and the Anthesteria; their purpose defined the time in the year they had to be celebrated. Similarly, the festival of Proerosia—‘rites before ploughing’—also called Proarcturia (Robertson 1996) (i.e. before the rising of Arcturus) exemplifies this tight connection between cult and timing. The name of the festival denotes the exact time in the year it had to be held: before the heliacal rising (annual first appearance of a star a few minutes before dawn and after a period when it was invisible) of Arcturus, a star in the constellation of Boötes. At around 500 BCE, this event would have been visible from the latitude of Greece between our 26 and 28 September. Aside from the time in the year chosen to celebrate certain festivals, ancient Greek cult practice included also a significant number of nocturnal rituals. Such a timing was, of course, important in fulfilling the specific religious aims of these performances.

An initial brief discussion of characteristics attributed to darkness and its various properties, leads us to an investigation of the role of darkness in ancient Greek religious experience and how it shaped the participants’ memories of these occurrences. This is achieved by considering the relationship between natural and artificial light and religious architecture used in nocturnal and dawn rituals, for a number of initiatory, Mystery, and divinatory cults. It is demonstrated not only that their timing of the performances was deliberate and important, but more significantly that darkness had another function in ancient Greek cult practice: it was the medium that triggered emotions and symbolic referents in the minds of the participants. It follows that darkness was a key element in shaping the religious experience and memories of these events.

## Types of darkness

Light and Night (*Nyx*) lie at the beginning of everything in ancient Greek cosmogony and cosmology. Despite their differences, Hesiodic and Orphic traditions agree that the Earth (*Ge*) and *Nyx* are early divine mothers (on this see also Betegh 2004: 153–154, 166). For Hesiod, *Nyx* is born directly from Chaos before *Ouranos* (*Theogony*, 123), whereas for Parmenides she is one of the first elements to have existed (Parmenides fr. 9; Graham 2010: 239; see also Eudemos fr. 150; López-Ruiz 2010: 138, 153, 158). The union of *Nyx* and *Erebos* resulted in the birth of *Aether* and Day, whilst children of *Nyx* include Doom,

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black Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams, Blame, and Woe (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 123–125, 211–225). Thus Night, death, dreams, and the dark are closely associated in ancient Greek thought.

Today, we use the word 'Darkness' to describe the absence of light, but as a word, it is inadequate to accurately describe differing ancient Greek conceptions of darkness. Darkness is, for instance, a characteristic of Night (*Nyx*), but in this context it merely means absence of sunlight. This was one type of darkness, distinctively separate in the minds of the ancient Greeks from the dense darkness that characterized places like the Underworld. Thus words like *Erebos* and *Zophos* describe different dark conditions from those of *Nyx* (Marinatos 2010: 198–199). The difference between the two types of darkness does not simply lie in the density, but also in the properties that darkness carries. Parmenides thought of Night as obscure, dense, heavy, and unrecognized ('nyktadae, pykinon demas embrithes te' (fr. 8.59); 'nyktos afantou' (Simplicius, *Physics*, 180.11; see also Graham 2010: 219–221, 239 n. F8.56–59; Thanassas 2007: 69 n. 19). The darkness of the night is, though, a variable quality; there are dark and 'bright' nights, depending on the phase of the moon and the light it sheds on earth. In the absence of artificial light, a night lit by the full moon is still night, but quite different from a moonless night. In addition, because night is imbued with anticipation of sunrise, it is not only a temporary condition, but also a type of darkness that exists only in the world of the living and that can be manipulated (i.e. controlled through the use of artificial light).

Conversely, the thick darkness of *Erebos*, *Hades*, and *Zophos* is a permanent, irreversible condition of places not inhabited by living mortals (e.g. Sophokles, *Antigone*, 879; Hipponion tablet l. 10, *Haidos skotos ouloentos* 'shadowy darkness/gloom of Hades'; Entella tablet l. 11, *Haidos skotos orphoneentos* 'Hades' gloomy darkness'). The conditions present in the underworld and its landscape are unknown to humans; therefore souls of the dead arriving in the dark, shadowy, murky Underworld are in need of instructions in finding their way (on this see Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008: 21; Edmonds 2004: 47, 49). The depiction of deities and mortals alike carrying torches in iconography when visiting the Underworld (as seen e.g. in the Apulian red-figure volute krater by the Underworld painter (Staatliche Antikensammlung, Munich), in which Hekate is depicted holding a pair of torches) could indicate that this type of dense darkness posed difficulties in visibility. But Lucian's comment that, although the Underworld was supposed to be dark, no visitor seemed to have trouble seeing their way around (*De luctu*, 2), although satirical, attests to the meaning of these torches being not simply functional. Instead, the dense darkness of the Underworld signified the gloomy conditions of existence rather than simply a physical darkness that caused invisibility. Carrying lit torches in iconographic representations of visitors of the Underworld could also denote that those needing the light shed by the torches did not belong there; light carried from the world above may have marked these figures as invaders in that domain. Herakles in the Apulian volute krater by the Underworld painter is depicted as the recipient of the light shed by Hekate's torches, and Hekate lights Persephone's path as she leads her out of the Underworld in the fifth century BCE bell krater attributed to the Persephone painter (Metropolitan Museum). Since these conditions are characteristic of

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the world of the dead, and given that the rays of the all-seeing Helios only reached the world of the living, it is understandable why the type of darkness present in the Underworld existed only in places inaccessible to living mortals. Only through initiation to the Mysteries could an afterlife with light be hoped for; the light of the sun reached the Underworld only for pious initiates of the Mysteries (Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 449-459, 455-459; Pindar, *Olympian*, 2.56-67).

### The temporal significance of darkness in religious practice: nocturnal and dawn rites

The presence of natural light, or its absence, can have a significant temporal function in the context of ritual. Sunrise can, for example, herald the time of commencement or end of rituals. Ancient Greek dawn rites commenced with the appearance of the first rays of the rising sun. Such was the Panathenaic procession, which started at dawn (Burkert 1983: 155), when a runner brought to the Acropolis a torch lit with the new fire from the grove of Akademos (Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 1090–1098 with Schol.). Torch races are a common occurrence in Greek festivals, especially those performed at night. The absence of natural light made these events an impressive spectacle, with the light of the torches adding a festive note to the atmosphere of the race. This spectacle could vary considerably, even within the same city. In Athens, for instance, the Panathenaic torch race was a foot race (Pausanias, 1.30.2), whereas that held during the festival of the Thracian lunar deity Bendis was on horseback (Plato, *Republic*, 328a). Apart from torch races, other types of nocturnal ritual and activity were performed in various festivals, for example sacrificial meals, pyres, lustration rites, processions, *pannychides* (*pannychis*, singular, was a night-long ritual which ended before sunrise and usually involved the sole participation of women). These formed part of the ritual proceedings of the festival, but were usually not the main rituals; in most cases they marked the beginning and/or end of festivals.

A number of rites favoured the interplay between night and dawn (i.e. darkness and light), as did for example the Eleusinian Mysteries (e.g. ‘the light-bringing star of our nocturnal rite’, Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 342–343) and the Argive rite performed at the altar of Helios (Pausanias, 2.18.3). In the latter, the sacrifice of a ram took place at night, then, after crossing the river Inachos, a sacrifice was offered to Helios at his altar at dawn (Burkert 1983: 107). Dawn rites equally served chthonic cults, as did the funerary sacrifice honouring those killed at the battle of Plataea described by Plutarch. It involved a procession that formed just before dawn and wound its route from the Agora to the cemetery (Plutarch, *Aristides*, 21.1–4; Pausanias, 9.2.5) (for detailed description of the rite see Burkert 1983: 56). Thus the time of day or night a ritual commenced was part of its careful staging and performance. This intention is exemplified in the sacrifice of the inhabitants of the island of Keos, which took place during the first appearance of the dog-star Sirius, before dawn (at Sirius’ heliacal rising). According to Apollonios, the sacrificers waited on the mountaintop to see Sirius rise before commencing their sacrifices first to Sirius and then to Zeus (*Argonautica*, 2.527; cf. Schol. 498a/w; Heraclides fr. 141). The rite started at night, when it was still dark, and continued after dawn, into the day; so what commenced as a nocturnal ritual ended as a daytime rite. These examples are not exceptional occurrences. We know of several cases of rituals starting at night and ending just before, or at, sunrise. Such was the *pannychis* held at the beginning of the Panathenaic celebrations, and the rite described in Alkman’s

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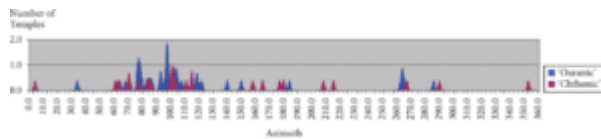
*Partheneion*, both discussed below. The light shed by the rising sun would dramatically change the visible surroundings and staging of these rituals. The written sources are explicit that such nocturnal activities had to end with the first rays of the rising sun, or that a different set of activities was performed with the arrival of dawn. The Kean, for example, commenced their sky watch with a night sky lavishly decorated with stars and constellations visible from the mountaintop. Their watch ended upon the heliacal rising of Sirius, visible in the few minutes before sunrise that were dark enough for the star to still be visible in the sky. Then the sacrifices would have taken place, as the nocturnal setting gave way to a bright, warm August morning, with commanding views of the Aegean Sea. The Kean rite was aimed at warding off the deadly powers of Sirius by setting an altar and sacrificing to Zeus Ikmaios (Zeus of the rain), as advised by an oracle when threatened by drought (Apollonios, *Argonautica*, 2.516–527 and Schol. 498; Kallimachos, fr. 75.34) (more detailed discussion of the custom can be found in Burkert 1983: 109–111). The need to control or even overturn the powers of Sirius for more favourable conditions, such as wind and rain, resulted in a ritual with a clear objective: to influence the cosmic powers. It seems that in order to achieve this, it was necessary to perform the ritual at the time in the day when the rotating cosmos was alternating from darkness to light. In this way, it seemed as if the entire cosmos witnessed these activities.

## Light and shadow effects in religious architecture

Double polarities such as Night/Day, Death/Life, 'Chthonic'/'Ouranic' are basic dualistic conceptions that become recurrent themes in ancient Greek cult, attested in cults that involve pairs of opposites, such as Pelops and Zeus in Olympia, and Opheltes and Zeus at Nemea. These dualistic conceptions are present in the cosmic cycle: brightness follows from and is followed by darkness, a cycle that also characterizes human existence: born out of darkness into the light, ending in submersion into darkness after death, followed by the arrival to a bright after-death existence as promised by Eleusinian and Orphic eschatologies. Only the gods are excluded from this repeated cycle: they do not face death and are eternally luminous and radiant. Yet the contrast of these polarities, although present in ritual, does not seem equally present in the structural positioning of Greek religious architecture. A comparison of (34 temples dedicated to 'chthonic' cults and 24 to 'ouranic' (there is currently much debate on how appropriate and sufficient these terms are; they are used here as abbreviations of groups of cults that have to this day shaped our understanding of Greek cult practice) does not reveal a preferential distribution or clustering in either group, which could be linked to the movement of the sun at a particular day in the year, or between sunrise and sunset (Figure 1). Instead, a very similar pattern of orientations is revealed between the two groups, indicating that the rising or setting position of the sun in the horizon was not associated with the placing

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of Greek temples in relation to their 'chthonic' or 'ouranic' attributes. The small predominance of ouranic orientations observed at azimuth range 78°–100° is probably the result of the greater number of ouranic cults in the dataset.



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*Figure 1* Graph displaying the distribution of 58 Greek temple orientations classed either as 'chthonic' or 'ouranic'. The 'chthonic' group includes for example Heroa, Asklepieia, temples to Demeter, etc., and the 'ouranic' group temples to Zeus, Hera, Athena, etc. Azimuth 0° and 360° stand for due North, 90° due East, 180° due South, and 270° due West.

Despite the absence of a dichotomy when grouping the orientations of Greek temples in this way, it is certain that the amount and direction of natural light was controlled and guided in religious architecture. Ancient Greek temple construction controlled the amount of

natural light admitted through the use of doors and openings, thus satisfying specific needs for illumination or darkness. This attests also to the important role of darkness/shadow/light effects in Greek religion. Sunlight admission was manipulated through the size and positioning of the windows and doors, creating maximum visual impact when viewing the cult image. This can be clearly demonstrated in the placement of the eastern entrance of the temple of Apollo at Bassae. In terms of the dimensions of these architectural elements and their proportions, however, there was no hard and fast rule throughout antiquity that determined the amount of light admitted in the temple cella. Variations in cella depth and width, as well as in the size and number of openings, indicate that different trends were followed. Seventh-century temples, for example, were long and narrow compared to their Hellenistic counterparts, which in addition seem to also have a greater amount of natural light admitted through larger window and door openings (Williamson 1993). This, in conjunction with the orientations of temples as demonstrated in Figure 1, means that general overarching conclusions on the amount of light received inside Greek temples, like the general assumption that Greek temples are oriented towards the east, are not particularly meaningful. Indeed, recent studies of temples from the Geometric to the end of the Hellenistic periods have shown that this traditional assumption is not as straightforward as commonly assumed. In fact, earlier conclusions that 73 per cent of Greek temples face east have been revised downwards considerably, to 58 per cent, indicating that Greek temples were instead constructed according to the particular needs of the cult they served (Boutsikas 2014: 1575; Boutsikas and Ruggles 2011: 58). Furthermore, the oversimplification of the argument for general eastern temple orientation is deceptive in terms of the reality of natural light admission. When talking about eastern orientations, we tend to assume that the east is the optimal direction for sunlight admission in a structure. However, what such an orientation actually means is that the structure would admit direct light to its interior at sunrise. A west-facing temple, on the other hand, does not mean a lack of optimal, consistent, and natural illumination by direct sunlight during the day. It simply means that the temple admits light at a different time in the day. An eastern orientation puts emphasis, then, on



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the time in the day at which light is admitted, rather than on the amount of light. Furthermore, the 'eastern orientation' argument assumes that the temples were in use at sunrise, an assumption which in most cases cannot be verified by our knowledge of the specific cults associated with the structures.

A further consideration that can confirm the idea that general conclusions on the placement of religious structures alone are not meaningful or sufficient to give us a sufficient idea of the presence or absence of light during the times the structures were in use is the fact that a large number of sanctuaries were visited and used at night, in the absence of daylight. Eva Parisinou examined a vast number of lamps from sanctuaries (2000: 136–161), remains of which have been recovered inside temples and within the open space of Greek *temene* (*temenos*, singular, is the sacred enclosure or space occupied by a sanctuary which included all the structures and features associated with the sanctuary, e.g. temple, altar, sacred trees). Her study demonstrates the extensive use of lamps found in a variety of contexts in sanctuaries dedicated to various deities such as Demeter, Artemis, Poseidon, Apollo, and Hera. The discovery of lamps inside temple cellas used as illumination devices within the temples (e.g. the sanctuary of Demeter Malophoros at Selinous and the temple of Artemis at Ephesos, Parisinou 2000: 14–17) complements the testimony of written sources on the use of artificial light inside temples (e.g. Athena's ever-burning golden lamp in the Erechtheion; Pausanias, 1.26.6–7). In addition, ritual performances were embellished with the use of artificial light such as torches and pyres (bonfire-like structures made by stacked wood set on fire, most commonly used in cremation). The numerous torches lit during rituals like the nocturnal *pannychides* would have had an impressive effect on the participants. This effect can be contrasted to the large wooden pyres which although just as impressive, had a very different effect. Yet we should note that the use of fire was not present solely in nocturnal rites. The eternal flame of Athena in the Erechtheion, or that of the Argive Heraion, remained lit during the day, and fire was used in different diurnal cult activities, for instance, in purificatory rituals.

## Rites of passage

A number of Greek gods were believed to have a close relationship with darkness, some divinities were even believed to live in darkness. Such were the Erinyes, perceived as creatures inhabiting the darkness beneath the earth (Homer, *Iliad*, 14.274–279; 19.259–260; Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 68–73, 417). They caused madness, and punished oath-breakers in the Underworld after death (Homer, *Iliad*, 3.278–281, 19.259–260). In Aeschylus' *Eumenides* they called themselves curses and attested to their chthonic nature and powers (417; see also Pausanias, 2.11.4, 8.25.4–7 on their cult), which brought danger and evil to mortals (Isokrates 5.117; Apollodorus, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum* 244 F 93). They were thus invoked in oaths, curses, and harming magic (Burkert 1985: 200, 428 n. 12). Capable of lurking in the minds of mortals (Aeschylus,

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*Eumenides*, 75–77) and inhabiting the Underworld, they moved between the worlds of the living and the dead. As mentioned previously, an array of other divinities are depicted in iconography holding fire-lit torches when entering the sphere of the dense darkness of the Underworld, perhaps to indicate that they did not belong in the world of the dead. These are deities which move in and out of the Underworld, such as Hekate, the goddess of nocturnal sorcery (Theokritos, 2.12–14; Schol. Kallimachos, fr. 466). Several other aspects of Hekate are beyond the scope of this chapter. For a detailed discussion, see Zografou (2010).

In ancient Greek conception, Darkness/Night had multiple meanings and roles. She permeated the two most significant events in human existence: birth and death. These two major life transitions bore direct light/darkness connotations (Homer, *Iliad*, 16, 187–188; 19: 103–104, 118–119) because they were characterized by symbolic and physical darkness. In iconography, this transition from light to darkness and vice versa finds its most explicit manifestation in the torch-bearing deities who accompanied mortals during these times (e.g. Eileithyia, Hermes), thus pairing symbolic and physical darkness in the use of fire (i.e. light). It follows that any discussion on darkness must also include light, just as light cannot be appreciated without darkness. The contrast of human experiences characterized by the alternation of light and darkness is given particular emphasis in the texts of the golden leaf tablets (Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008: 28), exemplified in a fourth century BCE tablet from Thurii:

But when the soul leaves the light of the sun,

go straight to the right having kept watch on all things very well.’

(after Edmonds 2004, 20)

The simulation in the rites of passage of the two major natural transitory states in human existence, death and birth, enhanced the importance of a newly acquired state of being; birth, the most important revelation in human existence, was mimicked in initiation rites through manipulation of darkness. Characterized by a sense of not belonging and detachment from the former self, not having yet rejoined the new community, the liminal stage of initiation rites made extensive use of darkness. This was directly contrasted to the next stage, the reincorporation or revelation, which was dominated by feelings of happiness, accomplishment, and bright light. With light comes the ‘enlightenment’ of newly revealed knowledge and a newly acquired status. In iconography, this transitory liminal stage was symbolized by the presence of torches. Testimony to this link in ancient Greek cognition bears the iconographic representation of goddesses associated with birth, like Artemis Lochia and Eileithyia, always depicted holding fire-lit torches. Both deities were associated with childbirth (e.g. Eileithyia: Homer, *Iliad*, 16.187–188; 19.103–104, 118–119; *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, 115–119), for without Eileithyia people would exist in an in-between state, being able to see neither light nor the night (Pindar, *Nemean*, 7.1–3; *Olympian*, 6.43–44). Archaeological finds offer full support of this idea. The cult statue of Eileithyia in Aigion was depicted holding torches (Pausanias, 7.23.5–6), whereas Artemis Lochia is probably the torch-bearing deity depicted in two votive reliefs,

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one from Delos dating to 420–410 BCE and a late fourth/early third century BCE from Achinos (Figure 2). Artemis carried torches also in Arkadia (Pausanias, 8.37.1, 8.37.3–4), Boeotia (Pausanias, 9.19.6), Messene (Pausanias, 4.31.10), Phokis (Pausanias, 10.37.1–2), Delos, Megara, Byzantion, Odessos, and Metaponto (Parisinou 2000: 82–83). However, she was not associated with darkness, nor did all of her depictions with torches link her to a transitory status. In some cases she holds torches also when associated with hunting or war (e.g. Artemis Soteira). She did not transgress the world of the dead and the world of the living in the way Hekate did. In fact, the opposite was the case: she was a deity not only carrying light but also responsible for bringing humans into light. Her light-bearing associations are testified in her epithets Amphyros ('with a torch in each hand'), Pyronia ('of the fire'), Phosphoros, Selasphoros (both meaning 'bringer of light'), Prosoias ('she who faces the sun'), Philolampados ('torch-loving'). Artemis was, however, closely associated with female initiation.



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Figure 2 Votive Relief to Artemis Locheia/Eileithyia, Achinos (PE 1041), third century BCE.

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The female initiation rite described in Alkman's *Partheneion* is believed to have been held at the Spartan sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. It ended at sunrise, with an offering at the altar of the 'Lady of the Dawn' (Alkman, *Partheneion*, 61, 87). The Pleiades, Sirius, and the sun are featured in the *Partheneion*, whilst the altar and temple of the goddess were oriented

towards the point in the horizon from where the heliacal rising of the Pleiades and the sun would have been observed at the end of the rite, a few minutes before sunrise (Boutsikas and Ruggles 2011: 60–65). The poem chorus is in a time contest with the sun, as the girls needed to have completed their tasks by the time its first rays appeared. Dozens of multi-nozzled clay lamps were excavated at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta—a seemingly common find in sanctuaries of Artemis, found also at Ephesos, Chalkidike, Thasos and Boeotia. Marble and steatite lamps were unearthed in Ephesos, single- and double-nozzled in the Thasian Artemision, multi- and single-nozzled in Chalkidike, etc. (Parisinou 2000: 151–155). These finds confirm the performance of nocturnal activities in honour of the goddess mentioned also in the written sources in locations outside Sparta, such as Messene, and Kos. The nocturnal element of Artemis cults is also attested in the black-figure krateriskoi from the sanctuary of Artemis in Brauron, which depict torch races or dances carried out by girls (Kahil 1965: 20–21; Parisinou 2000: 51–53).

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Because of the need for concealment which darkness could offer, initiation rites made extensive use of torches and lamps. Consequently, a number of rites of passage were nocturnal. The Athenian Arrephoria, for example, involved carrying boxes with unknown contents by young girls in the service of Athena, from the Acropolis to the sanctuary of Aphrodite and back to the Acropolis. The darkness of the night was a fitting setting for the mysticism involved in such rites. In this type of rituals, darkness played a dual role: it forged a fitting atmosphere in which mysticism and hidden actions prevailed. At the same time, though, the night may have offered the activities a cosmic dimension. At the time when the young Arrephoroi would be returning to the Acropolis, for example, in the few minutes before dawn, while it was still dark, they would have been able to see the celestial counterparts of their mythical re-enactment, the Hyades, rise in the predawn sky (Euripides' *Erechtheus*, fr. 370.71–74; Schol. Aratos, *Phaenomena*, 172; Boutsikas and Hannah 2012). The Arrephoria and the Artemis Orthia rites are examples of the role of the night sky and darkness, and the importance of the correct timing of certain Greek cults. The contrast of light and darkness enhanced the experience of the participants as in the case of the Keans, whilst catasterism myths and constellations were commemorated during the performance of rituals (Alkman, *Partheneion*, 60–63; Boutsikas and Ruggles 2011: 62–66). The backdrop of darkness enabled the stars to be visible and appreciated, just as the beauty of Agido was exceptional and paralleled to the sun in the *Partheneion*. In the poem, the girls sing of the beauty of Agido at a torch-lit night (Alkman, *Partheneion*, 39–43). The beauty of Agido, like the sun, can be appreciated only because darkness precedes it.

## Cults with Mystic character

*Pannychides* were held in honour of various deities such as Demeter (IG II<sup>2</sup> 1363, 1.17, 22), Dionysos (IG XII<sup>2</sup>, 499), Artemis (Pausanias, 6.22.9), and Athena. They included night-long singing, dancing, sacrifices, and dining (Euripides, *Helen*, 1362–1367; Euripides, *Heraklidae*, 777–783; Menander, *Dyskolos*, 857; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 371, 409). The Panathenaia had two *pannychides*, one commencing in the evening of the first day, after the end of the torch race, ending before the Panathenaic procession started, and the second starting after the sacrifice and the dedication of Athena's new *peplos* (IG II<sup>2</sup> 334, l. 30; ll. 31–2; Shapiro 1992: 56; Lefkowitz 1996: 79). Although *Pannychides* differed in function and proceedings from the main rites of the Mystery and initiatory cults, all these rituals had to be performed with the assistance of artificial light.

As mentioned previously, a number of Mystery cults and initiation rites involved the symbolic re-enactment of the initiates' death or mourning in order to mark the transition to the next stage. This stage involved a symbolic rebirth and elation resulting from the revelation of secret, life-changing knowledge. It is understandable then why Mystery

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cults were largely nocturnal (Jost 2003: 150), and why darkness played such a pivotal role in their performance.

Dionysos is heavily associated with darkness, having himself specified the nocturnal character of his rites (Eripides, *Bacchai*, 485–486). The myth of his gruesome killing and dismemberment as a child by forces that lurk in the dark tie him closely to darkness and death. In Delphi, where his tomb was, he was associated with winter (when the days are short) and mourning (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 365A, 388E, 389C). Although some of his invocations connect him with bright celestial light (e.g. ‘greatest light’, Euripides, *Bacchae*, 608; ‘overseer of the stars’, Sophokles, *Antigone*, 1146–1147), his rites were nocturnal. Indicative is his festival called *Nyktelia*, celebrated in Lerna (Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 364F) and Sikyon (Pausanias, 2.7.5–6). Throughout ancient Greece, women participated in nocturnal dances in the countryside or mountains (Sophokles, *Antigone*, 1146–1150; Plutarch, *Moralia*, 249e), and, becoming one with the wilderness of their surroundings, they displayed uncontrolled, frenzied behaviour (Euripides, *Bacchae*, 32–38; Diodorus Siculus, 4.3.3). The release of the civilized self in these outbursts of female freedom, far from the confines of the rules and order that governed the civic space, had to be concealed by a veil of darkness, which temporarily empowered and liberated the female participants of the rites, at the time that was appropriate for the ecstatic and orgiastic character of the Dionysiac cults—at night. In the Dionysiac rites, darkness thus had both a liberating and a concealing character. It allowed the participants to release their wild unruly self in an untamed landscape, while ensuring at the same time that these activities would not pose a threat to civic order; darkness hid this behaviour from the sight of those who should not witness it. Demosthenes’ account of Dionysiac *teletai* (rites) exemplifies the use of darkness in Dionysiac revelations: in a nocturnal rite, the initiates, seated and smeared with a mixture of clay and chaff, saw the priestesses appear from the dark like a frightening demon (Demosthenes, 18.259; Burkert 1987: 96).

Nocturnal rites illuminated by lamps and torches seem to be the norm for Demeter and Persephone. Lamps have been found in deposits of Demeter sanctuaries in Akrokorinth, Tegea, Bathos, Lykosoura, Eretria, Kephallonia, Chios, Thasos, Thrace, Pella, Crete, Attika, Boeotia, the Argolid, Sicily, Halikarnassos, Knidos, and Kyrene, whereas clay torch-holders with traces of use dating to as early as the seventh century BCE were excavated at the sanctuary of Demeter in Troizen and Ithaka (Jost 2003: 150; Parisinou 2000: 137). The goddess is depicted holding torches in her Arkadian sanctuaries in Thelpousa, Lykosoura (with Artemis), Tegea (with Persephone), in Phokis, Sicilian Enna, and Attika (Pausanias, 8.25.7, 8.37.4; Jost 2003: 155; Parisinou 2000: 136–150). Similarly, Persephone is depicted in iconography holding torches in numerous occasions (see Parisinou 2000: 125), and is called ‘mistress of fire’ in Euripides’ *Phaethon* (268). Clay figurines depicting females holding torches have been found in a number of Thesmophoria such as Priene and Sicily (Parisinou 2000: 126–128, 194 n. 14). Darkness during the festival of the Thesmophoria was linked to mourning and the conditions governing the Underworld. On the first night of the festival, in a re-enactment of the journey to the Underworld, women holding lit torches descended to underground *megara* to bring the remains of previously sacrificed pigs. The mystic character of the Thesmophoria was achieved, as in the case of

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the Dionysiac rites, by being celebrated in the countryside, outside the civic space, at night, with the exclusion of men (Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousai*, 1149–1153). The story about the castration of King Battos of Kyrene, who dared to spy on female celebrants of the Thesmophoria (Aelian, fr. 44), and that of the Lakonian women celebrating at Aigila attacking their Messenian capturers with knives and spits (Pausanias, 4.17.1) may be exaggerations, but are indicative of the festival's emphasis on secrecy. The indecent speech in which the female participants of the Thesmophoria engaged was another reason for the secretive nature of the festival. Just as in the Dionysiac rites, the nocturnal setting of the Thesmophoria obscured the actions involved and allowed the women to regain their freedom for a few days, without posing a threat to the civic framework.

Darkness was integral in the creation of a mystic atmosphere, which was also necessary for initiation to Mysteries (see also Gatton this volume). The procession to Eleusis arrived at the sanctuary of Demeter in the evening of 20 Boedromion (Euripides, *Ion*, 1076–1079), and the majority of activities associated with initiation to the Eleusinian Mysteries were carried out at night under the light of torches: torch-lit libations, dances, processions, the *pannychis*, the search for Persephone in the open space around the Telesterion, etc. (Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 326–333, 342, 444–448; Sophokles, *Oedipus at Kolonos* 1048–1052; Euripides, *Ion*, 1075–1084). The existence of the *Dadouchos* (torch-bearer) attests to the significance of artificial light during the unfolding of the nocturnal rites. Torchlight at night symbolically re-enacted passing through the dark Underworld—dying in order to be reborn—in rituals concerned with the afterlife. The atmosphere created by combining the darkness of the night and the magnificent effect of the lit torches and the pyres during the Mysteries created feelings of mysticism and devoutness (Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 444–448; Euripides, *Bacchae*, 486). During the final stage of initiation, in the evening of 21 Boedromion, these conditions would be reversed: darkness would be replaced by flooding, dazzling light inside the Telesterion after the revelation of the *Hiera/Deiknymena* (Hippolytus, *Haeresium*, 5.8.40; Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, 12.33) (for discussions on what would have caused this sudden flooding light and the arrangement of this event, see Clinton 1988: 71–2; Mylonas 1961: 119–120; Parisinou 2000: 70). The sources are explicit on the lasting impression left in the minds of the initiates from the alternation of light and darkness (Hippolytus, *Haeresium*, 5.8.40; Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, 12.33). The bright light resembling the light of the sun had direct references to the promised happy existence after death (Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 155, 340–351, 455–459). The use of sudden light after darkness stood for revelation and insight. In the previous moments, the initiates experienced darkness, symbolizing lack of knowledge and their search for the true meaning of life. Darkness in the context of the Mysteries (*skotos* and *vorovos*, Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 273) stood for a gloomy afterlife in desolate darkness for the uninitiated (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 480–482; Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 454–459; Graf and Johnston 2007: 107); in a more general context, darkness is a characteristic of the Underworld and death (e.g. Simplicius' introductory remark to fr. 13 in Thanassas 2007: 74–75; Hades' invisibility cap, Hesiod, *Shield of Herakles*, 226). An idea already present in the *Iliad* (6.11; Euripides, *Alkestis*, 269; Sophokles, *Antigone*, 848, 988–989).

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Conversely, torchlight or sunlight signified fulfilment of the promise of sunlight for the privileged initiates in a happy afterlife. The sunny parts of the Underworld were reserved for the blessed and the heroes (Pindar, *Olympian*, 2.61–77 and fr. 129), where their souls ‘will go on playing and dancing in places full of brightness, pure air and light’ (Plutarch, *Non posse*, 1105b). This belief is in tandem with the inscription of the Hellenistic altar at Rhodes: ‘for us alone do the sun and the divine daylight shine all of us who have been initiated’ (after Pugliese Carratelli 1940: 119). This aim was also fulfilled by the gold leaf tablets, which, although not entirely uniform in their content, ensured that the soul ‘carrying’ them in passage would find its way to the meadow of the blessed, not the dark, shadowy existence of the Homeric dead (Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008: 5, 9–10). (A discussion of the function of the tablets can be found in Cole 2003: 207–213; Edmonds 2004: 31–37; 2011: 3–10; on the special place reserved in the afterlife for those initiated in the Dionysiac Mysteries, see Burkert 1987 21–22.) Although this belief about the dark existence in the Underworld for the uninitiated was not shared by all ancient writers (e.g. Plato, *Republic*, 363d–e, and the author of the surviving commentary of the Derveni papyri—for a discussion on this see e.g. Betegh 2004: 88–89; Cole 2003: 206), it must have been common knowledge, because even Pausanias, who did not believe in this distinction, in his description of a painting in Delphi made by Polygnotos of Thasos, pointed out the uninitiated who were destined to draw water in sieves in the afterlife (Pausanias, 10.25.1–31.12). The close relationship between the absence of light and death is attested as early as the *Iliad*, where the darkness that comes upon the dying is, in some cases, called *Nyx* (e.g. 5.45).

In many examples from ancient literature, darkness, apart from being associated with death, is also synonymous with evil and trickery (Homer, *Iliad*, 10.204–210; see also Dowden 2010: 111, 112) and with strong negative emotions such as fear, grief, and despair (e.g. Euripides, *Helen*, 629). Most commonly, darkness is used as a metaphor for ignorance, in contrast to light, which always stands for knowledge—Helios saw and knew everything (Homer, *Iliad*, 3.277; *Odyssey*, 11.109, 12.323). Demeter carries torches throughout her search for Persephone in literature (Homeric Hymn to Demeter, 47–50). The torches signify both Demeter’s lack of knowledge of her daughter’s whereabouts and her concern that Persephone had entered a domain beyond Demeter’s control. The experience of the Underworld is in Plutarch similar to an initiation, involving pointless wanderings, tiring walking, and fearful paths that lead nowhere (Plutarch, fr. 178). A near-death experience which was part of rituals concerned with the afterlife was an element of the Eleusinian and Dionysiac Mysteries and later of the Mysteries of Isis (Eleusinian Mysteries: Plutarch, fr. 178; Dionysiac: Euripides, *Bacchae*, 605–635; Isiac: Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11.23–27). By and large, this experience was represented by darkness followed by the appearance of flooding light, signifying the end of the experience of death, and the initiates’ newly acquired knowledge.

The connotations of darkness, however, need not be necessarily negative. The *pannychides* took place at night because of their mystical character, but they do not seem to have been associated with the negative undertones of darkness with which other cults with mystical character were linked. Similarly, in a number of occasions the blind possess

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special knowledge, and act as mediators between the world of the living and the divine realm (Christopoulos et al. 2010: xi) (e.g. Tiresias). Here, darkness acts as a form of concealment of metaphysical abilities and of the possession of 'spiritual light'.

It has been argued that Mystery cults have several things in common with magic. Both are exclusive and require some form of revelation: the magician, just like the hierophant (the person who showed and interpreted holy things in Mystery cults), had to go through stages of initiation, while both types of rite presupposed special relationship with the deities involved (Graf 1991: 192, 197). Magic is another type of ritual that achieved the required secrecy and mysticism through darkness. Associated with magic was the divine triad Artemis-Selene-Hekate. Hekate was summoned at night, and was invoked at intersections of three roads when seeking oneiromantic (divination based on dreams) prophecies. Similarly, magic dolls of Selene-Hekate made of magic components (clay, sulphur, and the blood of a spotted goat) had to be placed in the shrine late at night (in the fifth hour) facing the moon (Eitrem 1997: 178). Magic had to be performed at night, since it invoked the demons, the dead, ghosts and deities associated with them (see also Petrovic 2007: 8). In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the torches held by Hekate shed bright light (52-53). As with Artemis, the light that Hekate carries is also reflected in her epithets: Amphipyros, Pyrphoros, Phosphoros, Dadouchos, Daidophoros—yet Hekate's dark properties are beyond dispute. Conversely, Artemis does not belong to the sphere of magic; she is instead indirectly associated with it (Petrovic 2007: 5-6). Darkness in this context is indicative of the lack of communication between the world of the living and the Underworld. With the light they carry, torch-bearing deities traverse both worlds, assisting in communication with a dangerous realm that should otherwise be left alone.

## Divination

Magic spells dictate the time that necromancy had to take place: at night, because the night brings dreams (Eitrem 1997: 177). Divination cannot be omitted from a study that investigates the role of darkness, especially divination taking place in incubatory oracles. Incubation was a common characteristic of Greek necromancy, where contact with the dead was sought for advice or healing. Dreams or visions (healing visions in certain cases) were experienced in the Asklepieia, the Nekyomanteia, and at the oracles of Amphiaraos in Oropos and Trophonios in Lebadeia (Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.207; Lucian, *Philopseudes*, 27; Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 1539-1545; Pausanias, 1.34.5, 9.39.11; Philostratus, *Imagines* 16 *Amphiaraus*; Clark 1968: 64-65). Since ghosts inhabited the Underworld and appeared in the dark (Strabo, 5.4.5), cults invoking the dead had to satisfy two main requirements: a landscape which would psychologically and emotionally prepare visitors for the Underworld experience, and a descent in order to psychologically imitate going down to the gloomy Underworld (see also Zografou this volume). In a number of oracles of the dead and other cults, in which incubation and visions or dreams were part of the experience, the descent was mimicked through movement within the



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structure. This movement assisted in recreating a sense of the conditions of the Underworld. The structures were built in landscapes that resembled the imagined dark, gloomy landscape of the Underworld, and where water was an integral part of the landscape. The oracle of the dead in Acheron was located in a marshy land with poplars and willows at the meeting point of three rivers, just as the ancients imaged the landscape of the entrance to the Underworld to be (Homer, *Odyssey*, 10.509–514; Pausanias, 1.17.5, 5.14.2; Plato, *Phaedo*, 112e; Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6. 297, 6. 323; see also Ogden 2014: 166–167). A dark landscape also characterized the oracle of the dead in Avernus near Cumae in Campania, located in a volcanic landscape close to the sea, within ‘a wild wood of black and impenetrable trees’, causing the area to be inhabited by ghosts (Strabo, 5.4.5). Here it was not just the landscape that was imbued with gloom and darkness. We are told that the inhabitants of the area, who were also servants of the oracle, lived underground, having constructed an entire network of tunnels to communicate with each other. This was done because, according to their customs, they should never see the light of the sun. They could only ascend above ground at night (Strabo, 5.4.5). Similarly, the Nekomanteion at Herakleia Pontika on the south coast of the Black Sea had an entrance to a cave leading down to an underground chamber through a stairway (Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Postomerica*, 6.469–491; Pomponius Mela, 2.51), and that at Tainaro had a temple constructed in the shape of a cave (Pausanias, 3.25.4), placed in a dry and rocky landscape with commanding views of the sea, that gives the visitor the impression that he/she has arrived at the end of the land (Figure 3). Necromantic consultations commenced long after sunset, ideally at full moon, thus in the middle of the month. The consultation involved several days of fasting, preparation, and incubation in dark rooms, where the ghosts were anticipated.



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Figure 3 View of oracle of the dead at cape Tainaro and its surrounding landscape

(Photograph by E. Boutsikas).

Contact with the dead through necromancy was similar in many ways to Mystery initiation. Purification and darkness were compulsory in both types of ritual. In necromancy, the seclusion of oracle seekers in dark chambers, where they also slept, was obligatory, for example, in Acheron and

oracles of Asklepeios and Amphiaraos (Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 1539–1545). The practice finds abundant support in the archaeological record. Incubation rooms, where the oracle seeker would sleep and anticipate the vision of the god to appear in his dreams, have been securely identified at the Asklepieia of Corinth and Epidauros (Roebuck 1951: 24, 42, 45, 46, 55, 57), Pergamon (Ziegenaus and De Luca 1968: 29–31, 39–47, 111–115, 125–134), and Messene (Luraghi 2008: 279 n.115, 280), to mention but a few examples. A Greek magical papyrus recording a magic spell capable of conquering death bears

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witness to an ancient Mystery procedure in the Idaean Daktyls involving initiation, during which the oracle seeker descended to an underground *megaron* and witnessed visions (PGM LXX.13–16; see also Betz 1980: 288, 292–293). The procedure resembles that of the oracle of Trophonios in Lebadeia, where those who wished to consult the oracle had to descend to an extremely narrow underground chamber at night and wait for the vision or hearing to come to them, in what is described even by ancient authors as a near-death experience (Pausanias, 9.39.9–11; Plutarch, *Moralia*, 590a–592e; Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 506–508; Bonnechere 2002: 182; Clark 1968: 64–65; Ustinova 2009a: 91–92). A preoccupation with the Underworld and the facilitation of procedures through the use of darkness characterized both necromancers and initiates. Contact with the world of the dead gave both groups the privilege of attaining secret knowledge, and could only be achieved in darkness (for more similarities, see Ogden 2004: 125–127).

The interplay of light and darkness in order to emotionally manipulate the participant was also possible on a different level: through religious architecture. Some oracles aimed at psychologically preparing the oracle seekers through spatial movement within religious structures. The aim was clear: separation from the surrounding world through a dark passage, or by entering a dark chamber symbolic of this distancing. This was achieved in a number of ways: through descent to a narrow subterranean hole at the Trophonios oracle, and through labyrinthine passages and a light-deprived existence for several days at the oracle of Acheron. Interestingly, at Apollo's oracle in Didyma, the grand ascent by the large staircase and the arrival to an equally grand *pronaos* is in direct contrast with the two transverse passages flanking the *pronaos*. They led through a very narrow, sloping, dark corridor out into the open air again at a much lower level (Figures 4 and 5). Darkness was also an essential element in the sunken *adyton* where the Pythia's tripod was located in Delphi. At the oracle of Klaros, consultations took place only after dark. There, Apollo's mouthpiece descended into a cave—in fact a subterranean complex of chambers and passages under the temple's floor—took a drink of the sacred water and began to prophesy (Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 3.11; Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.54; Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, 2.232; Parke 1985: 138) (Figure 6). At the oracle of Apollo in Patara, Lykia, the priestess was locked in the temple at night waiting to be visited by the god (Burkert 1985: 115). Other similar examples of Apollo cults exist, such as the sanctuary of Apollo Ptoios in Boeotia, where the 'nightly' god appeared to oracle seekers in a gloomy grotto (Herodotos, 8.135.1–3; Guillon 1943: 109–10; 1946; Schachter 1967: 1). It transpires that the god of light would communicate with his mouthpieces in complete darkness. The frequency of this practice indicates that for a number of oracles, architecture was the medium of constructing artificial darkness in order to satisfy the needs of the cult.



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Figure 4 Didyma Temple of Apollo, North passage to temple's interior

(Photograph by E. Boutsikas).



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Figure 5 Didyma, Temple of Apollo, South passage from temple's internal courtyard

(Photograph by E. Boutsikas).



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*Figure 6* Klaros, Temple of Apollo, subterranean structures

(Photograph by E. Boutsikas).

### Discussion

In Greek ritual practice, the use of artificial light at night depending on the context in which it was used, had a dual role: literal and symbolic. In its literal expression, artificial light (i.e. fire) was used throughout nocturnal rituals in order to facilitate the procedures. Its symbolic role had a number of meanings depending on the purpose and context of the rite involved. It could symbolize the change of status of a newly married woman, during her transition from the *oikos* (household, family) of her father to the new hearth and *oikos* of her husband, at a wedding ritual. At the same time, the light of the hearth was synonymous with warmth (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 968–9). In a different context, lit torches held by birth deities like Eileithyia and Artemis Lochia can be symbolic of the aid offered by these deities in bringing children to light, i.e. to life. In addition, light in iconography and literature can be synonymous of knowledge, revelation, enlightenment, and happiness (Parisinou 2000: 2–3). Darkness, on the other hand, is more often than not symbolic of the opposite conditions: lack of knowledge, concealment, death, and mourning.

Darkness shapes ritual experience. Leaving aside the impressive effects of artificial light in nocturnal activities (such as torch races and processions), visually, darkness functions as the backdrop that allows revelations to inspire awe, focal points to stand out, spectacles to be appreciated. The participants of the Arrephoria and the Partheneion rite, for example, could connect visually and verbally—through a dialogue in the case of the Partheneion—with celestial bodies linked in myth and tradition with the rites performed. The performance of open-air nocturnal rituals meant that the surrounding landscape was shrouded in darkness, providing the background against which the constellations and artificial light could be appreciated. In this context, darkness created the ideal conditions for the commemoration of catasterism myths (myths narrating the transformation of a hero or monster into a constellation), linking the microcosm to the macrocosm. Temporality was a defining factor in Greek ritual. Nocturnal rites enhanced ritual experience, and added the dimension of a participating cosmos in the ritual activities.

At the same time, darkness has an indisputable impact on the emotional condition of the participants, not necessarily negative, especially in those cases where an interplay with light is present. It triggers different types of emotions from those produced by daylight: nocturnal rituals are aimed at offering a different experience from day rituals, producing an impression dominated by mysticism and religious devoutness. Mystery cults aimed to relieve the fear of death (i.e. a condition of permanent darkness) through newly acquired knowledge that brightened the souls of those initiated. Fear, grief, despair may have been emotions experienced by the participants of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but these were not the emotions the initiate's memory of this experience would focus upon. These negative emotions would have been overshadowed by revelations made in a spiritually heightened atmosphere. The presence of emotional and physical darkness was a precondition of appreciating the brilliance that followed. Thus darkness was a necessary step in

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acquiring knowledge. Life was not going to be the same. Rituals 'change those who perform them' (Chaniotis 2011: 10) and the presence of darkness in rituals intensifies the emotions and experience of the participants, thereby also influencing the impact of this event's memories. In this context, darkness also offers the ideal concealment for revelations and actions that had to remain secret.

Fear, despair, and submersion in a near-death experience in the dark were also emotions experienced by those who consulted the oracle of Trophonios or the Nekyomanteia; but in these cases the negative feelings would not be replaced by the happy and hopeful undertones that characterized Mystery cults. Here, the emotional and physical darkness was not to be lightened by hopeful promises: the oracle seeker would remember this experience as dreadful and terrifying. Memory of contact with the dead had to remain unpleasant. Thus darkness in ancient Greek religion does not simply influence the experience, but also manipulates the mind.

Ancient Greek religious ritual involved the participation of all senses. The types of emotion evoked by nocturnal rituals vary: mysticism, liberation, excitement, hope for light, fear, grief, bereavement, despair. The carefully orchestrated ritual actions (involving singing, dancing, and choreographed performance), and the interplay with light that characterized ancient Greek nocturnal rituals, successfully channelled strong and (at times) contrasting feelings during what was an emotionally intense experience. Recent research in cognitive motor neuroscience argues that movement, actions, and performance are imprinted in human memory in the same way as words, sound, smells, and images (Brown and Parsons 2008; Krakauer and Shadmehr 2006; Schmidt and Lee 2011). Combining the performance of such activities with an intense emotional state can convert these experiences to strong, lasting memories of the event. The spatial and temporal setting of a performance are of paramount importance in understanding the ritual experience. Darkness is a decisive factor in religious experience. It intensifies emotional conditions, whilst shaping the ritual experience and memory of the event.

## Acknowledgements

I am thankful to the Royal Society of New Zealand and the British Academy for funding parts of the research presented in this chapter. My thanks are also extended to the Ephorate of Antiquities in Athens and Lakonia for granting me survey permissions, and to the Ephorate of Antiquities of Phthiotida and Eurytania for permission to publish the Achinos Stele. I also wish to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments and insightful suggestions which led to significant improvements of the final outcome.

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